

To Seek and To Save the Lost

The Parable of the Rich Fool

Luke 12:13-21

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Scripture

During the final few months of Jesus' life he journeyed from Galilee to Jerusalem, where he would be crucified. While traveling to Jerusalem Jesus gave his followers some very important teaching regarding discipleship. His instruction covered a number of different topics regarding Christian discipleship. Jesus' next topic deals with the doctrine of covetousness.

Today, let's read about the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:13-21:

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." ¹⁴But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." ¹⁶And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' ¹⁸And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." ' ²⁰But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:13-21)

Introduction

In Dr. Philip Ryken's commentary on Luke he gives an illustration from John Grisham's novel *The Testament*. Grisham's novel opens with the dying words of a man who will soon be

parted from all his money. Here are his last thoughts on earth:

Day, even the last hour now. I'm an old man, lonely and unloved, sick and hurting and tired of living. I am ready for the hereafter; it has to be better than this. . . . My assets exceed eleven billion dollars. I own silver in Nevada and copper in Montana and coffee in Kenya and coal in Angola and rubber in Malaysia and natural gas in Texas and crude oil in Indonesia and steel in China. My companies own companies. . . . My money is the root of this misery. I had three families – three ex-wives who bore seven children, six of who are still alive and doing all they can to torment me. . . . I am estranged from all the wives and all the children. They're gathering here today because I'm dying and it's time to divide the money.¹

Then Ryken comments, "Whether rich or poor, this is how life always ends: with the dead leaving it all behind, and the living dividing whatever is left. Yet the living are not always satisfied with the way things get divided."² That was true of the man who approached Jesus to adjudicate an inheritance dispute in Luke 12:13-21. Jesus used this opportunity to address the sin of covetousness.

Lesson

The analysis of the sin of covetousness as set forth in Luke 12:13-21 warns us of the danger of greed.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Request to Jesus (12:13)
2. The Answer of Jesus (12:14)
3. The Warning of Jesus (12:15)
4. The Parable of Jesus (12:16-21)

¹ John Grisham, *The Testament* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), 1-2.

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1: Chapters 1-12, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 656-657.

I. The Request to Jesus (12:13)

First, let's look at the request to Jesus.

Luke wrote that **someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me"** (12:13).

Jesus has been teaching on various topics regarding Christian discipleship. He had been encouraging his disciples to fear God and not to fear any person, especially for being a follower of Jesus. He urged his disciples to acknowledge him before all other people, and said that he will reward them by acknowledging them before God and the angels in heaven.

Then, suddenly, as if the man had not been listening to a word that Jesus said, he told Jesus – he didn't *ask*, but *told* Jesus – to tell his brother to divide the inheritance with him. What astonishing impertinence: To tell the Son of God and Lord of glory what he must do!

Do you ever tell God what he must do? Do you go to God and tell him that he should do something for you, as if he is there to facilitate your agenda, your priorities, or your desires?

II. The Answer of Jesus (12:14)

Second, notice the answer of Jesus.

Jesus did not like the impertinence of the man at all because he addressed him as "**Man,**" something like our English "Mister." Jesus **said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?"** (12:14).

Apparently, as commentator William Barclay notes, "It was not uncommon for people in Palestine to take their unsettled disputes to respected Rabbis; but Jesus refused to be mixed up in anyone's disputes about money."³

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 194.

Why did Jesus refuse to get involved in this dispute? Jesus refused to get involved in this dispute because his present calling was to seek and to save the lost (19:10). One day he will be the ultimate Judge when he comes to earth the second time to wrap up history and present the kingdom to his Father, but judging disputes was not his calling at that time.

Jesus was consistently clear about his calling during his first advent on earth. He had come to seek and to save the lost. He did not come to judge personal disputes between people, but rather to challenge all people to consider ultimate, spiritual, and eternal priorities. Commentator D. G. Miller said that Jesus was “not showing indifference to the claims of legal justice, but was insisting that there is a greater gain than getting an inheritance and a greater loss than losing it.”⁴

III. The Warning of Jesus (12:15)

Third, observe the warning of Jesus.

Jesus issued a warning, which applies to all people, **“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions”** (12:15).

The word translated as **covetousness** (*pleonexia*) can also be translated as “greed,” and refers to “a strong desire to acquire more and more material possessions or to possess more things than other people have, all irrespective of need.”⁵ This desire applies to all people, rich and poor alike. The rich are tempted to want even more of what they already have, while the poor are tempted to want things they do not have.

The sin that Jesus identified in this passage is not wealth

⁴ D. G. Miller, *Saint Luke* (London: SCM Press, 1959), 110.

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 290–291.

or possessions, but rather covetousness or greed. Jesus is highlighting a violation of the Tenth Commandment, which states, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s” (Exodus 20:17). The Bible also warns against covetousness in Ecclesiastes 5:10, “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income.”

The reason Jesus warned against covetousness and greed is because **one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions**. The word **abundance** (*perisseuein*) in this sense means “surplus, a superfluity of stuff.”⁶

Jesus is teaching that having more does not add anything to our lives. He wants us to be content with what we have, rather than have an inordinate desire to have more. T. W. Mason said, “It is true that a certain minimum of material goods is necessary for life; but it is not true that greater abundance of goods means greater abundance of life.”⁷

Recently I had dinner with two high school friends. We had not seen each other for 40 years. We reminisced about many of our fellow high school classmates. They noted how many of them had done extremely well financially, and it seemed to me that half of them have already retired because they have done so well financially. Now, I don’t know where most of them stand in terms of their relationship to Jesus, but, dear friends, **one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions**. Alexander Maclaren put it this way:

Not what we possess, but what are are, is the important matter. . . . The real life of a man has little relation to what he possesses. Neither nobleness nor peace nor satisfaction . . . has such dependence on property of any sort. . . . Covetousness is

⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1, 659.

⁷ T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1937), 271.

folly because it grasps at worldly good, under the false belief that thereby it will secure the true good of life, but when it has made its pile, it finds that it is no nearer peace of heart, rest, nobleness, or joy than before, and has probably lost much of both in the process of making it. The mad race after wealth, which is the sin of this luxurious, greedy, commercial age, is the consequence of a lie – that life does consist in the abundance of possessions.⁸

If it is a lie that life does consist in the abundance of possessions, what is the truth? The truth is true life is to know Jesus Christ and to live for him. The Bible says that Jesus is the life (John 14:6). The Bible says that true life is to know the only true God and his Son Jesus Christ (John 17:3). The Bible says that to live is Christ (Philippians 1:21).

Do you know Jesus Christ savingly? Do you live for Christ?

IV. The Parable of Jesus (12:16-21)

And fourth, look at the parable of Jesus.

Jesus told a parable to strengthen his warning to guard against all covetousness. He said, **“The land of a rich man produced plentifully”** (12:16). The **rich man** was a farmer, “but he represents all human beings who are seduced by all kinds of greed, whether statesmen or craftsmen or peasants or lawyers or nurses or doctors or secretaries or professors or mechanics or students.”⁹ God had blessed him, although he did not recognize it. God had sent just the right amount of rain and sunshine, and kept the pests off his farm, so that the farmer had a massive crop. The farmer did not cheat anyone nor abuse his employees. He was wonderfully successful.

⁸ Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 6:339-340.

⁹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 47.

But the man did not recognize God's provision, **and**, falling prey to a false sense of security, **he thought to himself, "What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?" And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods'** (12:17-18). Building new, larger barns was logical and prudent. It was a good idea. However, the danger lay in what was missing. There was no thought of stewardship. There was no understanding that he was a steward of God's possessions, and that he was to share God's blessings with others.

The problem with this man is that he was selfish and self-absorbed. All he could think of was himself. He had no thought for God or for other people. In fact, Covenant Theological Seminary professor Dan Doriani notes that of the fifty-four words in the parable in the original Greek, fully eighteen of them are first-person words like "I," "me," and "my."¹⁰

The rich man went on and said, **"And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry' "** (12:19).

Kent Hughes notes that "this is the only place in the Bible where retirement is spoken of, and here it is in the context of disapproval. Of course, the Bible recognizes aging and slowing down. But retiring to a life of self-indulgence finds no favor with God. . . . A retirement that lives for self is unbiblical and immoral."¹¹ I realize that there are many retirees in our congregation. You need to hear what Jesus is saying. The problem is not with retirement, the problem is with retirement that lives for self.

When my wife's oldest brother and his wife left the mission field after thirty-five years of service in difficult conditions that included war and massive government corruption, they

¹⁰ Dan Doriani, "What Shall We Do with Our Possessions," *Covenant Magazine* (Oct./Nov. 1998): 5.

¹¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 48.

relocated to Columbia, SC. However, they communicated to people that they were not “retired.” No, they said that they were “re-fired.” They were simply getting fired up to serve Jesus in a new and different way. And today as they are in their mid and upper 70s they are still constantly finding ways to share the gospel with children and with anyone who will listen!

Philip Ryken says the following about the rich man in the parable, “The man thought that he had a storage problem, but what he really had was a spiritual problem: he was an atheist.”¹² He lived his life as if God did not exist. His life revolved around himself. Oh, perhaps he went to church. He may even have given financially some of his money to the church. But his life, his priorities, and his actions did not reflect that he lived in a right relationship to God.

What about you? Are you living your life for yourself? Or, are you living your life for God?

Listen to what **God said to the rich man, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”** (12:20). God called him a **fool** because he lived his life as if there is no God. The man thought that he would live for many more years, but that very night God called his soul to meet with him. The rich man made all his plans for this world, and did nothing to prepare for eternity.

William Barclay tells the story of a conversation between an ambitious youth and an older man who knew life.

Said the young man, “I will learn my trade.”

“And then?” said the older man.

“I will set up in business.”

“And then?”

“I will make my fortune.”

“And then?”

¹² Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1, 664.

“I suppose that I shall grow old and retire and live on my money.”

“And then?”

“Well, I suppose that some day I will die.”

“*And then?*” came the last stabbing question.¹³

What about you? What will happen to you when you die?

Jesus ends his parable with a practical application. He said, **“So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God”** (12:21). A fool lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God. But the wise person lays up treasures in heaven and is rich toward God.

What does it mean to be rich toward God? We are rich toward God when his glory is our highest goal. We are rich toward God when his worship is our strongest passion. We are rich toward God when his fellowship is greatest satisfaction. We are rich toward God when his service is our deepest joy. We are rich toward God when we give financially to see his kingdom extended. We are rich toward God when we live utterly and completely for him.

Kent Hughes summarizes it this way:

We can enlarge our savings and build huge accounts to hold it all. We can plan our retirement so we will have nothing to do but change positions in the sun. We can plan our menus for the twilight years so that nothing but the finest cuisine crosses our lips. We can live as if this is all of life. We can laugh our way to the grave – only to discover at the end that we have nothing and are in God’s eyes fools. Or we can be rich toward God because we gave and gave and gave.¹⁴

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the sin of covetousness as set

¹³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, 196.

¹⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 50.

forth in Luke 12:13-21, we should be rich toward God.

I began this message by telling you about a scene from John Grisham's novel *The Testament*, in which a dying billionaire dies unloved, but not alone. Greedy relatives gather around his bedside, hoping for their share of his massive inheritance. But the book has a surprising ending. After the old man dies, the family gathers to read his last will and testament, signed shortly before his death. To their complete shock, the entire fortune is granted to an illegitimate daughter none of them has ever known. It turns out that this unexpected heiress is serving as a Christian missionary to people in Brazil.

A lawyer is sent to find her so that she can sign the necessary paperwork. When he finally tracks her down, she refuses to accept any part of the inheritance. The lawyer is dumbfounded, of course, because from his perspective life consists in the abundance of one's possessions. Yet because of her faith in Christ, the missionary has a completely different set of priorities. "You worship money," she tells the lawyer. "You're part of a culture where everything is measured by money. It's a religion."¹⁵ But the missionary belongs to a different religion and serves a different God, so in the end she decides to put every last penny into a trust fund for the world wide work of the gospel, including practical care for poor people in Brazil.¹⁶

Friends, Jesus died to pay the penalty for the sin of covetousness and every other one of our sins. Now Jesus is calling you and me to be rich toward God. He is calling us to check our attitude toward our wealth and our possessions, and to be generous with what we have. Jesus is calling us to give and give and give to God.

We would be fools not to give everything we are and everything we have to God. Amen.

¹⁵ John Grisham, *The Testament*, 285.

¹⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1, 666-667.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, the teaching of Jesus in the parable of the rich fool is directly pointed at each one of us.

We live in New Tampa and we are among the richest people in the entire world and even among the richest people in the history of the world.

Oh God, please forgive us for living as if you do not exist. Forgive us for living as if you do not care with what we do with the finances you entrust to us. It must surely grieve your heart that so little of the financial resources you entrust to us are given to see your kingdom expanded.

Help us to lay up treasure in heaven and to be rich toward you. May your glory be our highest goal. May your worship be our strongest passion. May your fellowship be our greatest satisfaction. May your service be our deepest joy. Help us to give generously and financially to see your kingdom extended. And help each one of us to live utterly and completely for you.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!